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Indian Valley Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Project

Scoping Document

Austin-Tonopah Ranger District
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
Nye County, Nevada

Responsible Official: Lance Brown
District Ranger

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Scoping Document

#52200

The US Forest Service, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Austin-Tonopah Ranger District is planning a project to improve greater sage-grouse habitat. This scoping document describes the purpose and need for the project, the project location, and a preliminary treatment proposal so that you can provide comments and help to improve the project. Instructions on how to comment and who to contact for more information are at the end of this document.

The responsible official for the Indian Valley Project is Lance Brown, Austin Tonopah District Ranger. Federal regulations allow the US Forest Service to exclude from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) categories of actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment, based on the agency's experience and knowledge. Unless extraordinary circumstances are found to exist, the proposed action falls under the category listed at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6): *"Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction."*

Purpose and Need for the Project

The purpose of the Indian Valley project is to maintain, improve, or restore habitat quality for greater sage-grouse and other sagebrush-obligate and sagebrush-associated species. Consistent with the revised 1986 Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan¹, including the 2015 Greater Sage-grouse Nevada Plan Amendment, the project is designed to:

- Reduce pinyon-juniper expansion into sagebrush ecosystems and riparian areas,
- Reduce the amount of Phase 1 pinyon-juniper to restore sagebrush habitats,
- Thin Phase 2 pinyon-juniper to increase spacing between trees and reduce fire hazard²,
- Increase sagebrush habitat connectivity,
- Reduce availability of perches for sage-grouse predators,
- Improve the condition of riparian and wet meadow brood-rearing habitats, and
- Reduce the likelihood of high severity wildfire in sage-grouse habitat.

The project is needed because pinyon and juniper trees in the project area are expanding into sage-grouse nesting, brood-rearing, and winter habitat and decreasing sage-grouse habitat quality and availability.

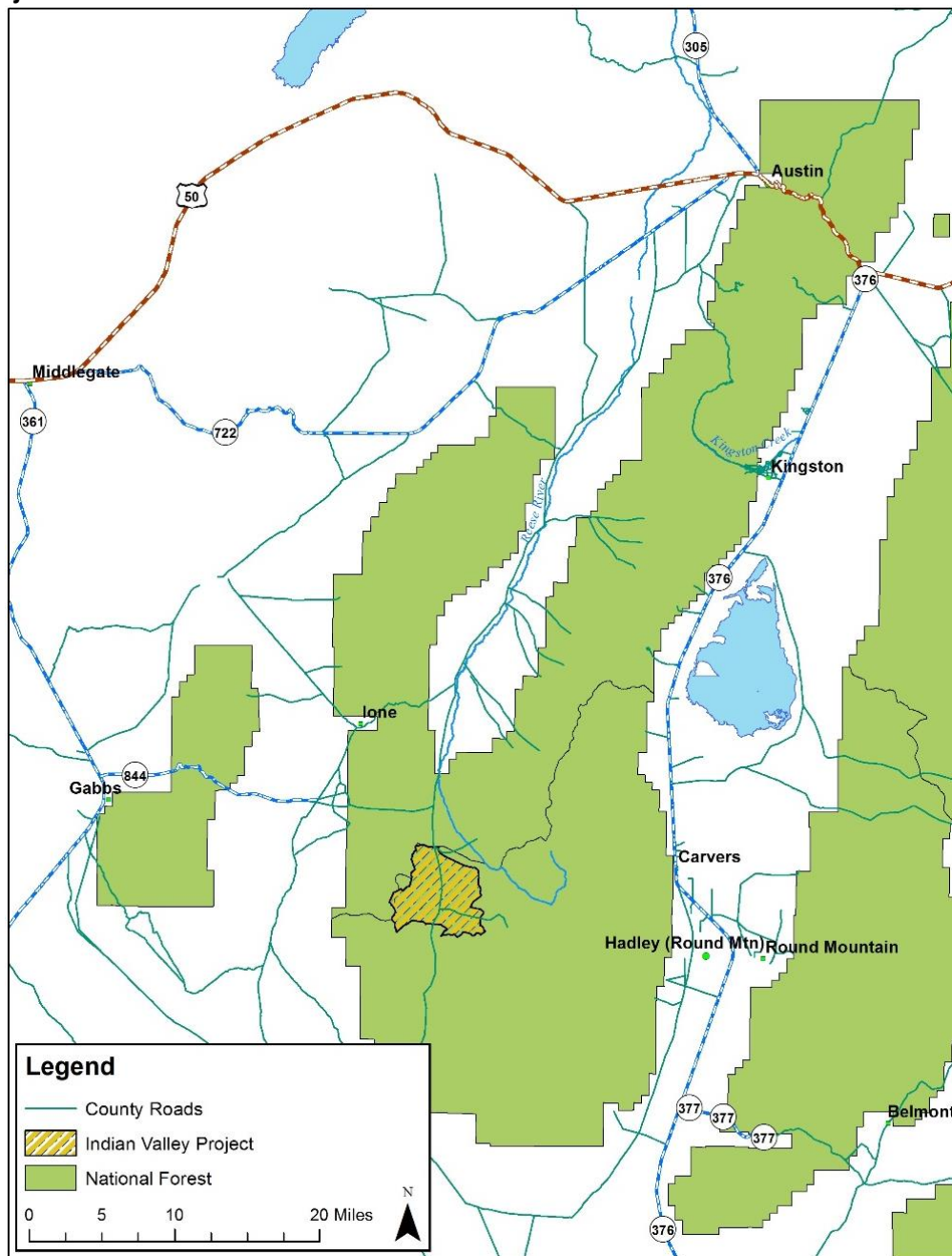
¹ 1986 Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan available at http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5143054.pdf

² Miller et al. 2008. Age structure and expansion of piñon-juniper woodlands: a regional perspective in the Intermountain West. Res. Pap. RMRS-RP-69. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

Project Location

The project is located on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Austin-Tonopah Ranger District, in Nye County, Nevada. Access to the project is approximately 55 miles south of Austin, NV and 55 miles north of Tonopah, NV on the Reese River – Cloverdale Road, also marked as Road # 018 on the Austin-Tonopah Visitor Maps (Map 1).

Map 1. Project location.



Inventoried Roadless Areas

Approximately 80% (13,725 acres) of the project area falls within five inventoried roadless areas (IRAs): Mt. Ardivay (5,100 acres of the 37,982 acre IRA), Arc Dome-Blank Mtn. (2,300 acres of the 3,662 acre IRA), Arc Dome-Cow Cyn (4,390 acres of the 4,410 acre IRA), Rat Trap Spring (1,530 acres of the 6,256 acre IRA), and Arc Dome-Leadbetter (all 415 acres of the IRA). The project is fully located within the greater boundary of the vacant Cloverdale-Reese River Allotment.

Project Treatment Proposal

The Forest Service proposes to remove pinyon pine and juniper on up to 17,000 acres within the Indian Valley project area. Treatment would be done on foot using chainsaws and other hand tools. No vehicles or mechanized equipment would be operated off established roads within the project area.

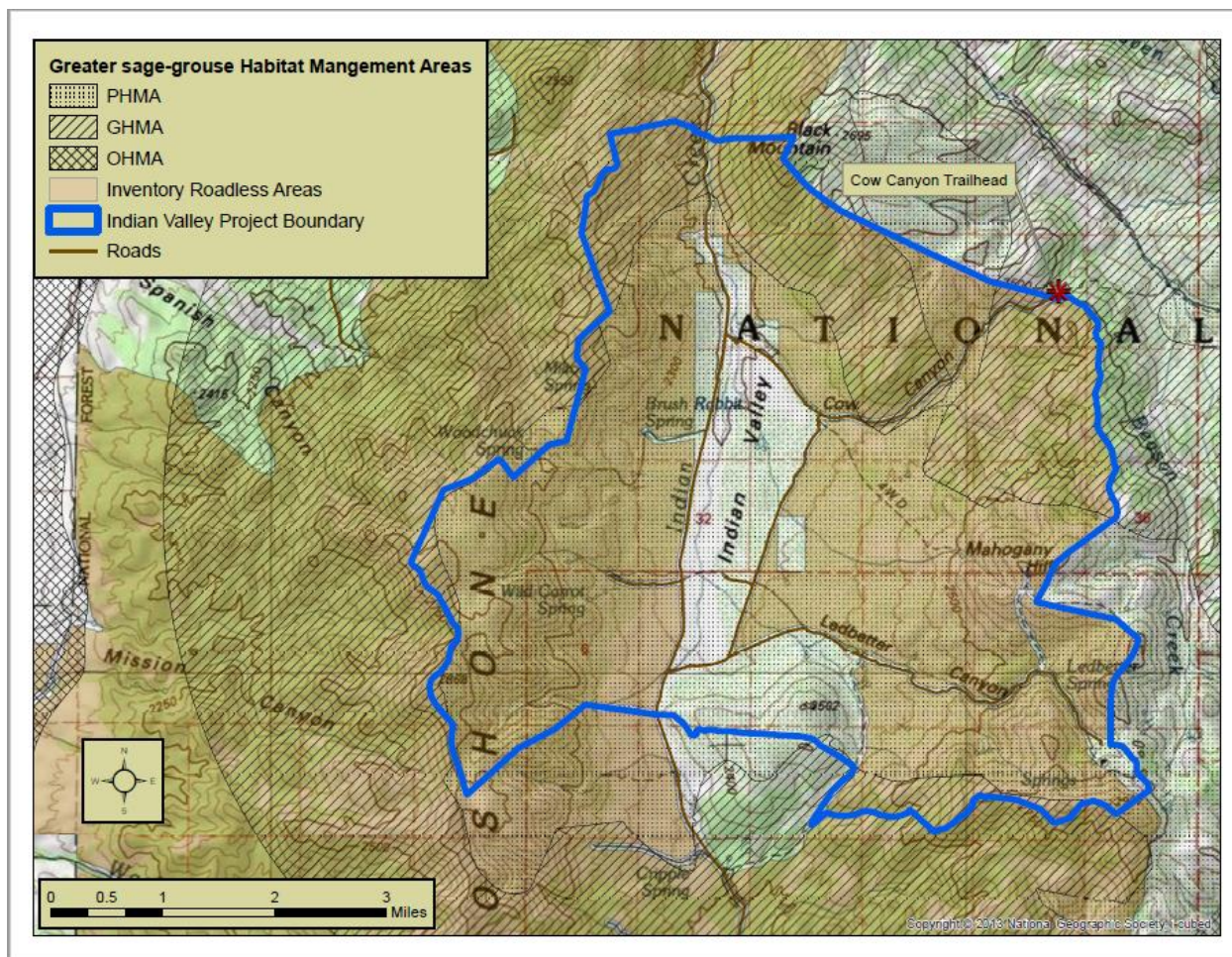
Cut and Leave Treatment: A cut and leave treatment, in which trees (including seedlings, saplings, and mature trees) are cut with a chainsaw or hand tool and left in place, would be used to remove most Phase 1 pinyon-juniper trees in the project area. In some cases, branches would be removed from trees and scattered to ensure that they lay on the ground at or below the height of surrounding sagebrush. Where there is evidence of persistent woodland (e.g., trees show historical use, or trees are situated in rock outcrops historically protected from fire), trees would not be cut. Trees may also be left uncut if they are located at a known dispersed campsite or if they have raptor nests present. Some larger trees in Cow Canyon would be removed to open a movement corridor for grouse from the breeding and nesting habitat in Indian Valley to brood-rearing habitat in higher elevation meadows.

Thinning Treatment: In Phase 2 pinyon-juniper woodlands, seedlings, saplings, and mature trees would be cut and left on site to create a transition zone to the sagebrush. Select thinning of Phase 2 woodlands would be used to increase spacing between mature trees, thus reducing the severity of wildfire. Treatment would favor the retention of large, cone-producing, mature pinyon pine. By reducing fuels, this treatment would enable more effective protection of sage-grouse habitat in the event of a wildfire, and improve habitat for other wildlife species (i.e., by enabling movement, improving thermal cover, and retaining desirable forage plant species in the understory).



Pinyon and juniper expansion into sagebrush ecosystems decreases habitat quality for sage-grouse.

Map 2. Indian Valley project area, with sage-grouse management areas from the 2016 Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Sage-grouse Plan Amendment and inventoried roadless areas.
PHMA=priority sage-grouse habitat management area; GHMA: general sage-grouse habitat management area; OHMA: other sage-grouse habitat management area.





Most of the project treatment area has sparse pinyon and juniper trees, similar to the foreground of this photograph, that would be hand cut, lopped, and scattered on site.

How to Comment

The Forest is seeking comments to help improve this project. Comments would be most helpful if received by January 31, 2017. Comments can be submitted by mail, over the phone, in person, or by email.

Written comments should be submitted to the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Austin-Tonopah Ranger District, Attn: Lance Brown, 100 Midas Road, Austin, NV 89310. Oral and hand-delivered comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours (8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays). Telephone comments can be submitted to the Responsible Official at 775-964-2671 or via FAX at 775-964-1451.

Electronic comments must be submitted to comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-austin-tonopah@fs.fed.us in an email message, or attached in portable document format (.pdf) or Word (.docx) format.

Comments, names, and contact information of those who comment will be part of the public record for this project. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, the District will not be able to send further project information to anonymous commenters.

For More Information

For more information, please contact Michael Owen West, Wildlife Biologist, at mowest@fs.fed.us or 775-482-7880.